

Bush's God talk: Analyzing the president's theology

by [Bruce Lincoln](#) in the [October 5, 2004](#) issue

Most discussions of George W. Bush's religious faith draw heavily on his campaign autobiography, *A Charge to Keep: My Journey to the White House* (1999), which puts religion at the beginning, middle and end of the story. Deliberately vague in its chronology, the book describes a man who drifted until middle age, when Billy Graham "planted a mustard seed" in his soul and helped turn his life around. Modifying the conventions of conversion narratives, the book acknowledges Bush's youthful indiscretions but downplays the nature and severity of his sins. It does not single out one decisive born-again moment, but describes a gradual transformation that included such steps as Bible study, repudiation of drink and a recommitment to God, church and family.

All this took place in 1985 and 1986, as Bush's oil business in Texas was floundering, his marriage was in trouble and his father was preparing his White House run. The following year, Bush became senior adviser on the campaign team. One of the core responsibilities assigned to him, probably as a result of his newfound faith, was to serve as liaison with the Religious Right. He was coached and assisted in this by Doug Wead, an Assemblies of God minister, good friend of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker and a longtime Republican operative.

Wead introduced him to the right people and taught him to win their support by showing he shared their values and spoke their language. "Signal early and signal often," he counseled, urging that the candidate's speeches be larded with biblical allusions. The elder Bush demurred, but his son took the lesson in earnest. (Wead goes unmentioned in *A Charge to Keep*, but is discussed in many other publications. See, for example, *A Man of Faith: The Spiritual Journey of George W. Bush*, by David Aikman [W. Publishing Group, 2004] or *The Faith of George W. Bush*, by Stephen Mansfield [Jeremy Tarcher, 2003]. Wead's motto, "Signal early and signal often," is quoted in Guy Lawson's "George W.'s Personal Jesus," *Gentleman's Quarterly*, September 2003.)

A Charge to Keep opens portentously. “Most lives have defining moments. Moments that forever change you. Moments that set you on a different course.” The first such moment for Bush is “renewing my faith.” Marriage and fatherhood are listed next, and the last is a sermon he heard in January 1999 as he began his second term as governor of Texas. Taking as his text Exodus 3-4, the familiar story of how God appeared to Moses in the burning bush and called him to free Israel, Pastor Mark Craig emphasized the way Moses initially hesitated to respond to God’s call, feeling himself unworthy. Connecting this critical moment in sacred history to concerns of the present, Pastor Craig observed that America was hungry for leadership, moral courage and faith. Good men, when called, could not hesitate. This prompted Barbara Bush to inform her son: “He’s talking to you.”

Bush’s response was attractively modest: “The pastor was, of course, talking to us all, challenging each of us to make the most of our lives.” His words sit side by side with his mother’s in this doubly coded tale. Those so inclined will see a humble man of faith, moved to do the right thing by good advice and a thoughtful sermon. Others will recognize a divine call, issued through an inspired preacher and accepted, after initial hesitation, by the Lord’s chosen: the new Moses. The text is designed to admit both readings. It suggests the stronger interpretation to those who find it congenial, but allows for a more modest reading for anyone who considers such views either presumptuous or preposterous.

Yes, Bush believes God called him to office. But he is careful to say this obliquely and to connect it with a broader theology of vocation, in which all are called to take their place and do their best. People’s stations may vary, but we all receive God’s grace and serve his will.

The title of Bush’s book foregrounds these concerns. It comes from a well-known hymn that was played at the church service with which he began his first term as governor in 1995. Written by Charles Wesley, its words and music are much beloved by evangelicals throughout Texas and the South.

A charge to keep I have,
A God to glorify,
A never dying soul to save,
And fit it for the sky.
To serve the present age,

My calling to fulfill;
O may it all my powers engage
To do my Master's will!

In his book, Bush told America what he told Texas with the hymn: he regards public office as God's calling and a sacred trust. He shares the hymn's inspiration with his staff, whom he expects to give their highest and best. To dramatize the point, he invites them to come see the picture hanging over his desk, where a determined rider on horseback charges up a steep hill, a picture also titled "A Charge to Keep." "This is us," he tells them, "we serve One greater than ourselves."

At the end of the chapter devoted to this theme, Bush cites a Bible verse, 1 Corinthians 4:2: "Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful." The verse is appropriate for the theme, but the way he introduces it feels a bit awkward and heavy-handed. Although Bush often alludes to scripture, he does not frequently cite chapter and verse this way. But this is a signal for his core constituency, making strategic use of their specialized reading practices. Full citation invites those with such habits to consult the passage. Anyone who does will find that the verse is embedded in this paragraph:

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. With me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then every man will receive his commendation from God.

One has to wonder: Is this how Bush regards himself? Is this how he would like to be regarded? More likely, this is another instance of double coding. If such things please you, he wants you to know he thinks of himself as a faithful servant of Christ, and feels himself accountable to no law save God's, no court save the Last Judgment. But if such things make you uneasy, he would prefer that the question never arise. Following the strategy of "Signal early and signal often," Bush employs biblical citation to communicate with his base, the linguistic equivalent of winks and

nudges.

The practice lets him convey things the faithful love to hear, while also letting them feel that they enjoy a privileged relation to him by virtue of sharing biblical reference points. At the same time, it lets him veil these things from people who would be put off by the biblical language or might challenge its propriety. Should anyone point out what he is doing, it is easy to deny any but a general meaning, while dismissing the criticism as verging on paranoia.

A Charge to Keep ends with a chapter explaining how the virtue of compassion informs Bush's policies and makes him a visionary leader. Here and elsewhere, however, he invests the term "compassion" with a particular meaning. To appreciate this, one has to consider his mythic account of the fall in American culture:

During the more than half century of my life, we have seen an unprecedented decay in our American culture, a decay that has eroded the foundations of our collective values and moral standards of conduct. Our sense of personal responsibility has declined dramatically, just as the role and responsibility of the federal government have increased. . . . We can now say, without question, that the belief that government could solve people's problems instead of people solving people's problems was wrong and misguided.

The reason government cannot deal with social issues, he asserts, is its lack of compassion. He understands compassion as a quality of spirit that characterizes (religious) individuals and groups, but is categorically different from the soulless, bureaucratic nature of the state. When government attempts to care for the needy, it does so for practical and political, not moral and spiritual, reasons. And in doing so, it obscures and inhibits the compassion of godly individuals, thereby compounding the problem.

However rhetorically attractive it may be, "compassionate" conservatism differs only slightly from rougher forms of the same creed. It remains laissez-faire in its approach to social welfare and justice, and justifies this stance by claiming the state has no ability (rather than no right or no reason) to intervene in such matters. Since compassion is a spiritual quality, according to this perspective, social welfare and justice are best left to religious institutions—whence the specialized form of privatization (and patronage) that is the president's "faith-based initiative."

For our culture to change, it must change one heart, one soul, and one conscience at a time. Government can spend money, but it cannot put hope in our hearts or a sense of purpose in our lives. This is done by churches and synagogues and mosques and charities that warm the cold of life. They are a quiet river of goodness and kindness that cuts through stone. . . . Government should welcome the active involvement of people who are following a religious imperative to love their neighbors. . . . Supporting these men and women—the soldiers in the armies of compassion—is the next bold step of welfare reform.

Bush made compassion a centerpiece of his 2000 campaign, actively courting religious people as well as suburban soccer moms who found other conservatives too callous. To counter the risk that his emphasis on compassion might make him seem effeminate, however, he often paired it with courage, describing these two as the quintessential American virtues. Like the other attributes that mark the U.S. as exceptional among nations, these are not just secular qualities. Rather, they are gifts of grace and the instruments of grace through which Americans do God's work in the world. Though the state, in Bush's view, is somehow incapable of compassion, nothing inhibits its capacity for courage, especially in the form of military action.

For about eight months after his inaugural, Bush held courage and compassion in rough balance. If anything, the latter seemed to prevail, albeit in his specialized sense. Tax cuts, a smaller role for government and a shift of social service to the faith-based "armies of compassion" were his chief agenda items.

The events of September 11, 2001, changed things. Initially rendered almost speechless, Bush searched for a way to comprehend and describe what had happened. "A difficult moment for America" was his first attempt, quickly followed by "a national tragedy" and "an apparent terrorist attack." (For the text of Bush's post-9/11 speeches, see *We Will Prevail: President George Bush on War, Terrorism, and Freedom* (Continuum, 2003). Once the latter had been confirmed, he promised to "hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts," and he asked the country for prayer. In his third speech of the day, he renewed this request and quoted the 23rd Psalm: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for You are with me."

The verse was well chosen, and it resonated with other aspects of this address, in which Bush first introduced a discourse on “evil.” He used the term four times (more than any other, save “terror/terrorist/terrorism”) and it let him characterize the situation with a stark moral simplicity. Elsewhere he spoke of America as defender of all that is good and just, “the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity,” thereby implying a struggle of light and darkness (“And no one will keep that light from shining”). His dualistic vision was best captured, however, in another passage.

Today, our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature. And we responded with the best of America—with the daring of our rescue workers, with the caring for strangers and neighbors who came to give blood and help in any way they could.

Courage here was of a defensive sort—the daring of rescue workers—while compassion took varied forms (caring for strangers, etc.). Both showed America at its godly best, confronting demonic evil. In subsequent days, Bush recalibrated the balance between the two virtues so that courage overshadowed compassion but never eclipsed it completely. At the same time, the kind of courage he invoked was increasingly aggressive. He pledged to pursue and destroy not just al-Qaeda, but terrorism; not just terror, but evil. Meanwhile, he informed the world there could be no neutrality in the coming struggle. “Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make,” he announced on September 23. “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.”

To his credit, Bush never (with a single unfortunate exception) cast the conflict as a crusade. When influential evangelists (Franklin Graham, Pat Robertson), academics (Samuel Huntington, Bernard Lewis) and generals (William G. Boykin) have construed Islam as the enemy, Bush has not rebuked them, thereby permitting some to believe he shares their views. In his own statements, however, he has staked out a more temperate and prudent position, speaking of Islam as a religion of peace. Our enemies are not those of a different faith, but “barbaric criminals who profane a great religion by committing murder in its name,” a phrase he used when commencing war in Afghanistan (October 7, 2001).

Countless changes can be rung on Manichaeian chimes once the binary opposition of Us and Them is aligned with plots pitting Good against Evil. Among the many variants Bush employed during and after the Afghan war were narratives of

American courage vs. cowardly terrorist attacks; American goodness and compassion vs. blind hatred and resentment; true American piety vs. self-deluded fanaticism; and modern civilization vs. medieval resistance to progress.

The last of these binaries implies a temporal sequence: the good future will succeed an evil past, just as surely as spring follows winter. Toward the end of the Afghan war, Bush began to develop this into a theological position, as when he told the United Nations: “History has an Author who fills time and eternity with his purpose. We know that evil is real, but good will prevail against it.”

When the time came to make his case for another war, Bush returned to this idea. In his third State of the Union address, after rehearsing charges about weapons and terrorist ties and portraying Saddam Hussein as evil incarnate, the president lifted his argument to the grandest of terms.

We go forward with confidence, because this call of history has come to the right country . . . Americans are a free people, who know that freedom is the right of every person and the future of every nation. The liberty we prize is not America’s gift to the world, it is God’s gift to humanity. We Americans have faith in ourselves—but not in ourselves alone. We do not claim to know all the ways of Providence, yet we can trust in them, placing our confidence in the loving God behind all of life, and all of history.

Ten months later, when the situation in Iraq had turned ominous and sour, he reaffirmed these views in an address to the National Endowment for Democracy (November 6, 2003). He began by observing that between the 1970s and the present, the number of democratic governments in the world had grown from 40 to 120. “Historians in the future will offer their own explanations for why this happened,” he said, and went on to anticipate their speculations. Such human factors as American leadership or the rise of a middle class paled, however, in comparison to the hand of the unmoved mover. “Liberty is both the plan of heaven for humanity and the best hope for progress here on Earth,” he announced. These are no secular matters.

The advance of freedom is the calling of our time. It is the calling of our country. . . . We believe that liberty is the design of nature. We believe that liberty is the direction of history. We believe that human fulfillment

and excellence come in the responsible exercise of liberty. And we believe that freedom, the freedom we prize, is not for us alone. It is the right and the capacity of all mankind. And as we meet the terror and violence of the world, we can be certain the author of freedom is not indifferent to the fate of freedom.

Much the same language was recycled last month in the speech with which Bush accepted his party's nomination. The sole major addition was the passage with which he concluded the address and moved to his benediction.

Like generations before us, we have a calling from beyond the stars to stand for freedom. This is the everlasting dream of America, and tonight, in this place, that dream is renewed. Now we go forward—grateful for our freedom, faithful to our cause, and confident in the future of the greatest nation on earth. God bless you, and may God continue to bless America.
(Text from the *New York Times*, September 3.)

All of these texts convey a sophisticated theology of history that rests on five propositions: 1) God desires freedom for all humanity; 2) this desire manifests itself in history; 3) America is called by history (and thus, implicitly by God) to take action on behalf of this cause; 4) insofar as America responds with courage and determination, God's purpose is served and freedom's advance is inevitable; 5) with the triumph of freedom, God's will is accomplished and history comes to an end.

This is the fullest and most sophisticated theological position Bush has articulated in the course of his presidency. As we have seen, it follows several earlier systems, each of which had its own force, rationale and moment. These include an evangelical theology of "born again" conversion; a theology of American exceptionalism as grounded in the virtue of compassion; a Calvinist theology of vocation; and a Manichaeian dualism of good and evil.

In developing these concepts, however, he has shown little concern for consistency and coherence. His theological systems simply pile up, much like his rationales for war in Iraq—of which 27 appeared over the course of one year. (Devon Largio delineates the 27 rationales in a much-cited honors thesis written this past spring at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.)

What is more, there are serious tensions and contradictions among the various systems. The one with which Bush ends, for example, differs sharply from the one with which he started. In his theology of history, salvation is an impersonal and inevitable process of gradual world-perfection, in which the Creator's goals are achieved through the collective actions of a chosen nation. By contrast, his evangelical faith makes salvation individual and by no means inevitable; it comes in a blazing moment of faith and decision, when a lost soul accepts Jesus as personal savior. If the theology of the early Bush is Pauline, his more recent stance is Hegelian, but without the dialectic and with America, not Prussia, in history's starring role. It is hard to imagine how one man can hold both doctrines.

I am persuaded that Bush's evangelical convictions, which he embraced decades ago in a period of life crisis, matter to him deeply. The other parts of this theology are more recent overlays. They took shape after he learned his trade as a successful politician, and they were worked out in collaboration with a talented staff. It is hard to say how committed he is to any one of these later formulations. Indeed, it is hard to know in what sense they are his, or what it means to speak of "belief" in such a context. Does he own and inhabit these beliefs, or simply profess and perform them? When he tried to explain his theology of history without a prepared text, just a few weeks ago, the results were not pretty.

See, what's happening is that freedom is beginning to rise up in a part of the world that is desperate for freedom, a part of the world where people are resentful because they are not free human beings. And we believe that freedom is the Almighty's gift to every person in this world. It is the basic belief of the American system. And so—I say this to the families of the soldiers I meet. I tell them their sons and daughters or husbands and wives are on an incredibly important mission for history. See, when Iraq is free, it will begin to change the vision of those in Iran who want to be free. When Iraq is free, it will say to the Palestinians, who have been subjected to leadership that has not led in their interest, that it's possible to live at peace with our close friend, Israel. (Remarks at victory dinner in Santa Monica, California, August 12, available at www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases.)

When this text is placed beside Bush's more formal addresses, the contrast is revealing. In the speeches written by his staff, the same phrases (or more elegant

versions thereof) articulate sophisticated ideas that are born of serious reflection. In his version, they are reduced to a jumble of feel-good slogans, with which the president rallies a loyal constituency to support controversial, even dubious policies (in the current example, the Iraq war and his Middle East policies).

When speaking in his own voice, the president transforms his writers' subtle instruments of persuasion into clumsy parodies of themselves. Even Manichaeism—a doctrine not known for its subtlety—can be vulgarized in this fashion.

I see things this way: The people who did this act on America, and who may be planning further acts, are evil people. They don't represent an ideology, they don't represent a legitimate political group of people. They're flat evil. That's all they can think about, is evil. And as a nation of good folks, we're going to hunt them down.

Bush made these remarks two weeks after 9/11, as the Patriot Act was being drafted, and he made them to employees of the FBI. In this heated context, his blunt language construed al-Qaeda not just as quintessentially evil, but as having no political beliefs and no legitimacy. It also appears that its followers have no legal rights, since his words convert criminal suspects into beasts fit for hunting.

One is forced to conclude that Bush's theology and his deployment of it is less systematic than pragmatic. Although he fosters the impression that his policies are grounded in deep religious conviction, the reality is often the reverse. Vague notions and attractive terms such as "compassion," "history" and "freedom" are given rhetorical, sometimes even intellectual, coherence by his staff. Bush may resonate to some of the ideas and some of the language they prepare for him, but for the most part he uses these to justify policies that have already been decided on quite other grounds. Preemptive wars, abridgments of civil liberty, cuts in social service, subsidies to churches, and other like initiatives are not just wrapped in the flag; together with the flag, they are swathed in the holy.

Many of those responsible for shaping these policies are tough-minded neoconservatives who share with political philosopher Leo Strauss a cynical view of religion as unfit for elites, but useful in swaying the masses. To Bush falls the task of securing broad support for this team's agenda from his fervently evangelical base. It is not an easy business, and it requires all the linguistic skill, theological ingenuity and tactical acumen his staff can muster. The apparent sincerity with which Bush

displays his convictions while delivering their lines is a significant piece of his own very real genius. It is also the condition of his success. We will see if it gets him through the elections.